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ABSTRACT

The beliefs and values of teachers and administrators in one school district regarding their desire and capacity to change and on helping school leaders plan the change process were evaluated, in light of the America 2000/Nebraska 2000 community school campaign. This report summarizes the evaluation focus, procedures for data collection and analysis, and results. The overall evaluation plan was to join this school district in the process of change and respond to their needs as appropriately as possible. Unstructured interviews were conducted with teachers and administrators in seven buildings. Five questions addressed staff reactions and behaviors related to changes that had been accomplished in the district, general attitude or desire to change, and feelings of the comprehensiveness or span of change that staff would like to see. The transcribed interviews were analyzed for strong beliefs and values. Each participant reviewed and responded to a draft report. A final report was prepared for the school board and administrators and teachers involved, which was biased in a favorable position toward the school system and designed to unify participants. Several topics were found in responses to more than one question (parent involvement, community support and responsibility, commitment to meeting student needs, greater spread of abilities/achievement within classrooms, staff are hoping/willing to make changes but expect support, teachers want more input in decision making, students and society have changed, early intervention in primary grades is important, and lack of continuity between buildings). An appendix lists proposed changes. (RLC)

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WHEN IS A SCHOOL DISTRICT READY FOR CHANGE? AN EVALUATION

by

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WHEN IS A SCHOOL DISTRICT READY FOR CHANGE? AN EVALUATION

Introduction

When school districts make commitments to be *America 2000/Nebraska 2000* community-schools, they anticipate designing and implementing major changes. As an outsider participating in the change process in one of these school districts, it became apparent that the proposals could involve major changes in the school system. This evaluation focused on the culture (beliefs and values) of the teachers and administrators regarding their desire and capacity to change.

The purpose of identifying the aspects of the culture of this school relative to change was twofold. One was to uncover the beliefs and values of the people regarding change so that these could be addressed and acknowledged as the school moved through the change process. The other was to help school leaders in planning the change process.

Unstructured interviews were conducted with teachers and administrators in all seven buildings in this school system. The transcribed interviews were analyzed for indications or themes of strong beliefs and values. Each participant in the study was asked to review and respond to a draft report. A final report was prepared for the school board and the administrators and teachers involved.

The study of culture in this school has limitations similar to other studies of culture. It is recognized that culture is composed of individual beliefs and values that contribute to group or shared beliefs and values. Also, it is acknowledged that, within any group, there are sub-groups who may profess similar beliefs that vary widely from other groups. There were obvious differences in beliefs and values between buildings within the system. The study attempted to portray an overall view and thus, admittedly, did not reflect all possible variations and subcultures.

The final report to the school board and community committees was biased in a favorable position toward the school system. The emphasis on the positive was purposeful. It was hoped that the report would contribute a unifying perspective to the people involved. A separate report to the school superintendent identified specific suggestions concerning the change process that were not included in the other report.

This report presents an overview of the evaluation focus, the procedures for collecting and analyzing the data, and a summary of the results. The Appendices include further information and the final report to the board and community.

Focus of the Evaluation

The culture of a school can be defined as encompassing the behaviors and the beliefs and values behind behaviors within a bonded group of people. To examine the culture of a group of people regarding change, the questions asked allowed each person to express individual feelings and describe their behaviors. The goal was to analyze all responses for similarities or consistent ideas and actions across the school system. The objective was to identify and communicate to the school system, what individuals believed and valued about the concept of change.

Five major questions were asked of each person interviewed:

1. Can you describe a previous district wide improvement effort, the process and its effects?

2. What are your best hopes for being an *America 2000/Nebraska 2000* community-school?

3. What are your worst fears about being an *America 2000/Nebraska 2000* community-school?

4. What is the general attitude of the staff toward change?

5. What if you could change anything in this school (no limit on rules or resources)?

Since past improvement efforts might leave a residue of strong feelings, either positive or negative, the first question sought to evaluate staff reactions and behaviors or changes that had been accomplished when the district was involved in an earlier Effective Schools improvement effort. Questions two through four were intended to uncover the general attitude or desire to change. Current reaction to the *America 2000/Nebraska 2000* initiative was sought as this has not been connected or linked to any previous or existing improvement projects. The final question was included to extract a feeling of the comprehensiveness or span of change that staff would like to see.

Evaluation Plan

The overall plan for this evaluation was to join this school district in the process of change and respond to their needs as appropriately as possible. As a member of the community-committee, it soon became apparent that the leader and the group of mostly parents and business representatives were intent on supporting major changes. The change process proposed multiple activities be

enacted simultaneously in an on-going cycle. Each building would be focusing on different areas.

To provide a statement to the school about the beliefs and values of the staff regarding change, the following evaluation plan was developed and reviewed with the Assistant Superintendent.

1. Interview each of the seven building administrators.

2. Arrange times to interview teachers from each building.

3. Prepare a draft report.

4. Submit the draft report to all participants for review and comment.

5. Revise draft and prepare a final report for the school.

Teachers were selected for interviewing in a random fashion. A schedule was developed to visit each of the seven buildings over three school days. Teachers who had planning time during the scheduled time at that building were interviewed. There was no attempt to select or disregard specific staff on the part of the evaluator or the building administrator who helped schedule visits. In some instances several teachers were interviewed at the same time. Permission was sought and granted to tape all interviews. The interviews were transcribed. In all, twenty-six (26) teachers and administrators were interviewed on tape. Conversations with other staff (not taped) and observations also provided supporting information and impressions during these visits to the schools.

The transcribed interviews, as a whole, were analyzed for themes or commonalities that were significant or of value to both staff and administrators across the district. The responses to each question were reviewed and specific topics listed and counted. When a topic was present in responses to more than one question, it was noted as having value. Teachers' responses were compared to the administrators' responses. Responses by building were analyzed for variances.

In the final analysis, it was decided that the report would not compare responses from teachers with those from administrators. The only area in which there was an observable difference between the two groups was in their reaction to the 'top-down' decision to initiate this improvement effort. Building comparisons were also avoided as comments and observations indicated that this district has a lack of good communication and articulation between buildings. Emphasizing differences could exacerbate the situation.

A report was drafted from the conclusions and results of the data analysis. This draft was sent to all persons who had been interviewed asking for reactions and responses. One-third of the

participants responded with suggestions and comments. The comments were in agreement with the substance of the report. The suggestions were included in the final report which was submitted to the school board, administrators and teachers who had participated in the study.

A second report to the superintendent discussed only the change process. Each report contained the results plus suggestions for using this information.

Summary of Results

The following topics were found in responses to more than one question:

parent involvement
community support and responsibility
commitment to meeting student needs
greater spread of abilities/achievement within classrooms
staff are hoping/willing to make changes but expect support
teachers want more input into decision making process
students and society have changed
early intervention in primary grades is important
lack of continuity between buildings

Responses to questions:

Can you describe a previous district wide improvement effort, the process and its effects? (Complete list in Appendix)

- Most respondents who had participated in the previous effort had favorable impressions of the process but consistently identified two problems: lack of follow-through on information collected and plans that were developed, and lack of communication from administrators connecting later activities to the original improvement effort.

- There were many changes cited that have occurred since that earlier improvement effort. Some are directly related to the building improvement plans and others are more indirectly attributable to the correlates of Effective Schools research.

- The changes that have occurred represent organizational or structural changes as well as changes in philosophy and attitudes.

- Many changes have been staff-initiated and, even with administrative support, have resulted in disjointed and uncoordinated efforts.

What are your best hopes for being an *America 2000/Nebraska 2000* school?

One-third of the responses included improving parent and community involvement and support.

One-third focused on student needs and student performance.

Of the remaining third, those with an opinion hoped for positive changes that lasted or really made a difference.

What are your worst fears for being an *America 2000/Nebraska 2000* school?

Of the few who expressed a fear, the concern was primarily that a lot of work may be involved with no lasting results.

What is the general attitude of the staff toward change? (Responses summarized with percentage on each opinion)

Most support change, few don't	72%
Some support change, some don't	20%
Few support change, most don't	8%

What if you could change anything in this school (no limits on rules or resources)? (Complete list in the Appendix)

The proposed changes can, for the most part, be described as broad and encompassing system-wide or philosophical change. There were only a few that dealt with individual needs. The majority of responses were focused on better meeting perceived student needs.

Conclusions

- Given financial and administrative support, the teachers and administrators in this school are, for the most part, willing to make changes.

- The teachers desire a greater voice in the decision making process.

- Many changes or improvements that have occurred would be enhanced if there were better coordination and articulation across building levels.

- This improvement effort's process should be changed so that at least some teachers are involved in the Steering Committee and other decision making processes. To strengthen coordination and articulation across building levels, the plan should:

    1. Have the Steering Committee develop, from the six priority areas, a general focus for the district rather than allowing each building to adopt different areas.

    2. Conduct a district wide self-assessment on the district priorities with results disaggregated by building.

    3. Each building would develop improvement plans to address the areas of need as determined by the district's self-assessment.

    4. Slow down the cycle and allow additional time for buildings to enact the improvement plans they develop.

Results

The impact of the report to the school and community is not known at this time. The information gained will be used in a further study of culture and the change process in this school district.

The suggestions made concerning revisions in the planned change process have all been adopted except the suggestion to add teachers to the Steering Committee.

APPENDIX

Proposed Changes

Responses to Question 5: What is you could change anything in this school (no limits on rules or resources)?

- district-wide commitment to high expectations for students and the resources to reach that commitment
- a dynamic at-risk counselor at the junior high
- more time to work with other teachers
- outcome-based education
- an alternative school at the senior high
- bring the ninth grade into the high school
- a detention room in the junior high
- a system to help at-risk students
- improved lines of communication between administrators and teachers (in one building)
- consistency in rules enforcement within one building
- need more teachers and counselors
- computer network tying classrooms together
- more counselor time in the middle school
- windows that open
- reduced class size
- more student-teacher contact time
- parent involvement and parent training
- ungraded primary
- improved communication between buildings
- involvement of teachers in the process of hiring new staff
- more teacher inservice on whole language approach
- extent whole language approach across the curriculum
- change teacher assignments every so many years
- pupil-teacher ratio adjusted to account for students with problems
- more teacher input in the decision making process
- inservices to address multicultural education
- more of a developmental philosophy towards learning
- safer environment for students
- extended day kindergarten
- transition room between kindergarten and first grade
- outcomes established for students
- more parent involvement
- a decent playground

Reported Changes in This School District In the Last Five Years

Organizational/Structural Changes

- remodeling of buildings and construction of new buildings
- hands-on science curriculum in elementary and middle school
- hands-on math in elementary buildings
- increased inservice district-wide
- advisory committees of staff and administrators in some buildings
- whole group instruction in primary grades
- student handbook in elementary
- consistent, defined behavior rules and enforcement (one building)
- retention policy changed in elementary
- middle school concept for grades 7-8
- whole language instruction in primary grades
- more individualized help for students through various programs
- exploratory classes in the junior high

Attitudinal Changes

- increased interest in personal development (staff attending classes and taking additional training)
- more experimenting with new instructional techniques (cooperative learning)
- greater cohesion of staff (especially noted in elementary buildings)
- greater consideration towards students and other staff
- more teacher input
- improved learning environment
- created an idea that we need to change
- improved staff communication in some buildings
- focused staff on common goals